



# “Living in a place called exile”: The universals of the alienation caused by isolation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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*Although various aspects of Ovid’s emotional reactions to exile have been researched, there has so far been no extended practical study that places the emotional content of his works into a new political context. In this respect Ovid’s voicing of his experiences can serve to illuminate the experiences of latter-day exiles. This article attempts to establish, by literary means, a picture of the alienation attendant upon exile and its sublimation. For this purpose the poetry of Ovid, as well as that of certain modern authors, is used as illustration. There are many parallels between the Rome of the turn of our era and the South Africa of previous decades: exile was a political weapon in both. Themes reflecting alienation in Ovid’s poems are universal, and still valid in situations of exile today. Ovid’s portrayal of his own exiled persona is used to draw a psychological profile of the experiences of alienation during such exile. This profile may be termed the “universals of alienation”, which is applied to the exile or imprisonment of the victims of contemporary political upheaval. The extent*

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*to which the verbalisation of such alienation serves to heal such a wounded soul is explored.*

## Opsomming

“Om te woon in ’n plek genaamd ballingskap”: die universalia van vervreemding veroorsaak deur afsondering

*Hoewel daar al heelwat aandag geskenk is aan Ovidius se emosionele reaksie op sy ballingskap, is daar tot dusver geen uitgebreide studie onderneem wat die emosionele inhoud van sy werke in ’n nuwe politieke konteks plaas nie. In hierdie opsig kan Ovidius se verwoording van sy gewaarwordinge dien om die ervarings van moderne ballinge toe te lig. Die artikel trag om uit die letterkunde ’n beeld te bepaal van die vervreemding wat veroorsaak word deur ballingskap en die verwerking daarvan. Vir hierdie doel word Ovidius se poësie en ook dié van sekere moderne skrywers as toeligting gebruik. Daar is baie parallele tussen die Rome van die eerste eeu en die Suid-Afrika van die jongste verlede. Ballingskap is in albei kontekste as ’n politieke wapen ingespan. Temas wat vervreemding in Ovidius se gedigte voorstel, is universeel en ewe geldig in hedendaagse ballingskapsituasies. Ovidius se uitbeelding van sy eie verbanne persona word ontleed ten einde ’n sielkundige profiel van die ervaring van vervreemding tydens sodanige afsondering te trek. Hierdie profiel, dit wil sê, die “universalia van vervreemding” word bepaal en toegepas op die hedendaagse verbanning (en ook opsluiting) van slagoffers van politieke onrus. Die artikel ondersoek die mate waartoe die verwoording van sodanige vervreemding ’n verwonde gees kan heel.*

## 1. Introduction

Exile, a political act with extreme emotional consequences, was used as a political tool by the Roman emperor Augustus. It also became a major factor in the South African political struggle. There are many parallels between first-century Rome and the South Africa of the recent past. The aim of this article is to establish, by literary means, a picture of the alienation attendant upon exile and its sublimation. For this purpose the poetry of the Roman poet, Ovid, as well as that of certain modern authors, are used as an illustration. In addition the personal narratives of South African political refugees, according to Clifford Shearing, also “need to be noted in a literary way” – that is, to be interpreted, like fiction (quoted in Bernstein 1994:290).<sup>2</sup>

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2 Pieterse (1971:xii) questions the effect of exile on South African poets’ work: “[Do they] become shrill and hysterical ... How does exile affect a poet?”

There has so far been no extended study that places the emotional content of Ovid's works into a new political context.<sup>3</sup> The South African poet, Stephen Gray, features Ovid in his collection of poems on diverse dislocations, and very deliberately repositions the poet into a modern milieu: "To charm Caesar I must turn my local friends into savages ... their whooping cousins crossing / the Danube, or call it the Kei, into this Colony ... / ... We represent Rome to them" (Gray, 1998:78-80).

## 2. Alienation: what it is

Alienation may be described as a psychological separation from the protagonist's accepted modes of thought, usually precipitated by some sudden impetus, whether internal or external. "The alienated are those people who have been excluded, or have excluded themselves ... the deeply maladjusted" (Hoopes, 1969:xii). Alienation involves estrangement, even from the self (according to Stephen Koff in Johnson, 1973). Temporary self-alienation may be the result of an "extraordinary crisis ... death of a beloved ... or exile" (Feuerlicht, 1978:58). Baxter (1982:12) quotes Marcuse on the Other as "losing its benign appearance and becom[ing] overwhelming, totalising, all-embracing", that is, the alienated protagonist always has an antagonist. Baxter quotes (1982: 112) Seeman on six categories of alienation: powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, cultural estrangement, social isolation, self-estrangement, and feelings of personal worthlessness. Geyer and Schweitzer (1981:178) correlate these feelings with stress. Alienation is a "method of coping with stress" (Geyer & Schweitzer, 1981:79).

My article will concentrate on the type of alienation resulting from the isolation experienced by exiled or imprisoned authors. For this I have found useful Robinson's (1994) collection of statements on the exilic experience by authors ranging in era and provenance, entitled *Altogether elsewhere*. The experiences of ordinary South Africans will feature as a form of "reality check" on the emotions reported by both Ovid and contemporary authors. My source for these personal narratives has been interviews conducted by Hilda Bernstein between 1989 and 1990, that is, before the return of many South African exiles. Most of these interviews were reworked by her and published as *The rift: the exile experience of South Africans* (1994). Other personal narratives are housed in the oral

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3 The original object of the research for this paper was framed as a psychological study, aimed at assisting the re-integration of returned South African exiles, by an M.A. student, Linde Moore, a psychiatric nurse, who, sadly, passed away in 2000, before she could complete her research. This literary paper serves as her monument.

history collection of the Mayibuye Centre of the University of the Western Cape.<sup>4</sup>

Most authors on the topic of alienation emphasise the loss of power of alienated individuals, and their awareness of their inability to exercise choice. Goldhill (2000:6) sees Nietzsche as the "exemplary – even fundamental – figure for contemporary discourse on exile". He isolates five factors in this discourse: nostalgic loss as symbolic of the human condition; loss of a spiritual, intellectual and moral placement; narratives of exile as connected to the concept of alienation under "modern, gendered individualism and power"; the "logic of appropriation" that is integral to exile; and the "changing patterns of nationalism as implications for exile". Goldhill writes in the context of the reclamation of earlier Greek thought by Greek writers under the Roman empire. The interviews collected by Bernstein very largely reflect similar factors, which are also integral to Ovid's presentation of himself as an exile.

### 3. Alienation through exile and sublimation through literature

Our modern era has seen much displacement of people. The concept of exile may be variously defined. Exile is epitomised by Ibrahim (1996), discussing Bessie Head's *A question of power*, as "the inability to be able to greet others casually". The concepts *home* and *exile* are essentially self-referential. Bernstein (1994:137) quotes South African exiles: "home is home"; also "[it is] hard in exile" (p. 142); and again, "being in exile is

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4 See transcripts in Bernstein (Mayibuye Collection, XIII:105-112, hereafter Bernstein Mb.) and Bernstein (1994:xvi) for detailed accounts of different types of exiles. The former features a discussion by an exiled psychiatrist of the problems that were experienced particularly by young adolescents. Many activists had been given one-way exit permits, and were officially exiled, others had simply fled (Bernstein, 1994:378). South African refugees, as mostly city dwellers, had different needs from those other Africans displaced by wars (p. 192). Migrant labourers were another, itinerant type of exile (p. 29). Involuntary exiles, the children of those who had elected to leave, were particularly disadvantaged by their social displacement (p. 52). In the end they had to "choose" a new identity (p. 434). Yet Derrick Beck, son of activists who fled to Botswana, came to love that country as his "first home" (Bernstein Mb. I:61). The tale of enforced separation between his siblings and their parents and their varying peregrinations (p. 61-65) makes harrowing reading and leaves an impression of infinite loss sustained by these children, some of whom died along the way. The story of the journalist, Terry Bell, and his feckless decamping from South Africa (after seven farewell parties) with a "temporary protectorate permit" and ultimately achieving Irish citizenship, after which he and his wife paddled back to Africa in a cano, ending at last for an unhappy stay at Mazimba in Tanzania after a stint in New Zealand, makes amusing reading (Bernstein Mb., I:73-85), but also gives a view of the loss of idealism that many exiles underwent, an alienation that meant distancing themselves from fellow-exiles.

being in exile" (p. 430). Gemma Cronin (second wife of Jeremy) felt the effects intensely: "Exile, it's poison really. I think it's poisoned us too" (Bernstein Mb., II:249; see Bernstein, n.d.). Ruth Weiss, a doubly exiled South African activist, whose Jewish parents had fled Nazi Germany, yearned for South Africa but felt "evicted" from Germany, "a place where I had been born but ... was not my home" (Bernstein Mb., XVII:54). Norma Kitson, whose husband was jailed for twenty years, put it thus: "... that's the tragedy of exile, ... that you can never return. There is no return from exile. There's a new life perhaps, maybe a better life, but there is never a return to the familiar."<sup>5</sup> Many use literature to bridge their individual divides from the known – to name a few, the writers of the modern Jewish Diaspora, reflected extensively in Robinson (1994), the South Africans Dennis Brutus (1968), Keorapetse Kgotsitsile (1990), C. J. Driver<sup>6</sup> and Bessie Head (whose "exile" was both as an expatriate and as a woman in a gendered society – see Ibrahim 1996).

Sublimation of exile through literature is not merely a modern phenomenon. When Ovid was exiled from Rome to Tomis on the Black Sea in about 8 A.D., he continued to write until his death in about 17 A.D. His exilic works comprise three collections: five books of *Tristia* ("sad songs"), a long piece of invective (the *Ibis*), and four books of *Epistolae ex Ponto* ("Black Sea letters"), all in elegiac verse. The central themes of these poems are his innocence of the charges levelled against him by the emperor Augustus, his loneliness and isolation, and the comfort that writing poetry affords him. The poet creates an heroic *persona*, posturing as the Exiled-Poet-that-Suffers. While writing about his abject misery and the frozen horror of Tomis, Ovid often seems to be mocking his own performance. A perceivable distance separates poet and exile. This is not alienation, but sublimation of that alienation into a newly integrated, powerful stance, supported by his comforting Muse. Of interest to this article are, however, those distinct characteristics of alienation that

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5 Further definitions are from Robinson (1994): Mary MacCarthy, p. 50: "An exile made a decision [to leave], a refugee is helpless"; Es'kia Mphahlele, p. 150: "A refugee becomes an exile when a country grants refuge"; Victor Hugo, p. 67: exile is enacted "within law, [by] force, without law, [by] violence", yet it is "absence embalmed in rosy dreams" (Breyten Breytenbach, p. 181), for "love for the fatherland begins on the frontier" (Heinrich Heine, p. 302). This is like the inability of exiles in Bernstein (1994) to shake off their South African identities (e.g. Benny Gilder, p. 197, Bunie Sexwale, p. 238, Dirk Coetzee, p. 212). Some admit to having gained by exile, but at a "high price" (Welcome Msoni, p. 372, Peggy Stevenson, p. 404).

6 Collected, along with I Choonara, Dollar Brand (now Abdullah Ebrahim), Timothy Holmes and Arthur Cronje, by Pieterse (1971).

emerge in his writings, which are timelessly apposite to all those isolated by imprisonment or exile.

Ovid converts his intensely personal, subjective suffering into an objective, quasi-fictional mode, a poetic depiction of alienation during exile comparable with contemporary authors' narratives and metaphors. Sometimes authors have deliberately associated themselves with Ovid, each finding a different reason for drawing a parallel.<sup>7</sup> The young Milton, rusticated to London from Cambridge, portrays the university town as a "barbarous Tomis" that he has fled. Oscar Wilde wrote a *De Profundis* ("From the depths") while in prison, depicting his woes in Ovidian terms (Claassen, 1999a:253). N.P. van Wyk Louw, teaching in the congenial atmosphere of Amsterdam, nevertheless produced a volume of poems entitled *Tristia*, where Africa is set against cultured Europe as the "place of barbarity".<sup>8</sup> D.H. Lawrence was, during the first World War, made to leave Cornwall because of his German connections. He several times referred to himself as feeling "like Ovid in Thrace", another victim of literary and political prejudice (Roessel, 1990).

These are all cases of conscious identification with the persecuted Roman poet. I argue for an innate psychological relationship between all in isolation – a relationship that transcends imitation and lies within the nature of human reaction to a particular kind of hardship. Such a reaction is best articulated by writers who have experienced isolation, whether as political prisoners or as exiles. They experience a similar cutting-off from all that is familiar, along with a feeling of repression and persecution. Ovid offers an early example. His presentation of exilic alienation can be verified by comparing it with the sufferings of later victims. In the words of Breyten Breytenbach, "Exile teaches you about individual fate with universal implications" (Robinson, 1994:182).

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7 Roessel (1990:351) speaks of the "solidarity of influence" that refers to the support a writer may derive from comparison with a predecessor. See Sienaert (1988) on Breytenbach's debt to Francois Villon, and Deudney-Theron (1991) on the influence of Breytenbach on Gerrit Kouwenaar.

8 See Schutte (1996) on Louw's conscious use of the classics to show the need for literary tradition and the importance of intertextuality as control by the text of the reader. For Van Vuuren (1988:67-83) Louw's poetry of exile functions as a metaphor for the twentieth-century *condition humaine*. We shall here leave aside Louw's complex relationship with Afrikaner nationalism. Bishop (1982:419-28) argues for David Malouf's novel *An imaginary life* (that sets Ovid in Tomis as the tamer of a traditional "wild child") as an exposé of the psychological experience of the alienation from their "European roots" felt by many Australians.

Jeremy Cronin (1987) terms political imprisonment “exile in one’s own country”. Imprisoned living authors such as Breytenbach, Cronin, Ngugi wa Thiong’o<sup>9</sup> wrote about their experiences. Each of these poets was ahead of his times, resistant to collective thinking, and averse to the political hegemonies of his era. I contend that the writings of these authors and others imprisoned or exiled for reasons political (George Mangakis,<sup>10</sup> Wole Soyinka,<sup>11</sup>) will most nearly reflect the total isolation that Ovid portrays himself as experiencing at Tomis. Certain South African prose writers, journalists like Ruth First, Hugh Lewin, Joyce Sikakane<sup>12</sup> give a useful, factual background that helps us interpret what other South African political prisoners experienced. The act of writing converts experience into “fiction”, in the basic sense of the word. Ruth First, Lewin and Sikakane all report on feelings of despair and isolation, yet the dawn of a feeling of camaraderie when they became aware of fellow prisoners.<sup>13</sup> They objectively detail their own emotional fluctuations during isolation.

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- 9 Ngugi was imprisoned in 1977 during the post-colonial struggle in Kenya. Like Ovid, he ascribes his detention to enemies “who read his pieces from his books out of context” to the ruler, Jomo Kenyatta (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1981:xv). Mbulelo Vizikhunzo Mzamane (reported by Goddard & Wessels, 1992:44-47) explains Ngugi’s struggle as an attempt to “de-colonialise” and “de-alienate” the African mind. Jacobs (1986) lists the different genres that comprise prison literature.
- 10 The Greek activist Mangakis (1970:14-19) explains that writing for him is “self-defence”, a way of “controlling his own mind”, helping him to fight the gremlins that beset his mind while in solitary incarceration. Some South African refugees first spent up to six years in solitary confinement (Bernstein, 1994:173) before leaving the country. This type of isolation is described by the exiled Esther Levitan as “the most powerful instrument they have” (p. 275).
- 11 Bardolph (2000) considers the possibility that Ngugi and Soyinka were recreating a “space for liberty” in their prison autobiographies. Lovesey (1995:31-45) compares the writings of both with Breytenbach, quoting Jacobs’ term “confessional narrative” for the fictionalising, and hence universalising, of individual stories.
- 12 First (1965), Lewin (1974), and Sikakane (1977) left South Africa after their release from prison. Ruth First was later killed by a letter bomb sent to her in Mozambique. John Schlapobersky in Bernstein (1994:83) confirms much of the detail given by them.
- 13 South African authors’ reportage of the reasons for their arrest, the circumstances, methods, even the names of some of their tormentors, coincide to such a degree that they provide a strong body of evidence that serves to prove the oral narratives recorded by Bernstein. A generation earlier, Bosman (2nd ed., 1969), writing of his experiences in a South African prison in the thirties, gives a largely similar view of the emotions and reactions elicited by confinement, that coincides with evocations by Franklin (1978) of the writings of prisoners in the United States of America.

Loss of a sense of belonging can occur within the home country. Sensitive individuals may feel ill at ease within their own milieu. Ovid's exile may have stemmed from a single, unspecified disruptive act, but what he wrote before did not fit into the general atmosphere of the Augustan reformation of Roman society. He was culturally dispossessed within Roman politics, despite his popularity with ordinary readers. Christopher Hope comments: "Exile becomes a condition, almost an affliction ... I went into exile before I left South Africa" (Bernstein, 1994:346). Darryl Pinckney discusses the double alienation of African-American intellectuals within the disoriented society of the black under-class, who found themselves even less at home in "liberal Europe".<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt reports on an unusually high rate of suicide among Jews "put into concentration camps by our foes and internment camps by our friends" (Robinson, 1994:110). Edward Said quotes Simone Weil on the need "to be rooted [as] the most important but least recognised need of the human soul" (in Robinson, 1994:146). For Said (see Robinson, 1994:139) the task of exiled poets is to "lend dignity to people denied an identity". This can sometimes be best realised by the fictionalisation of experience.

#### 4. Healing through speaking: a practical application

I have suggested above that themes reflecting alienation in Ovid's poems are universal, and would still be valid in situations of exile today. Verbalisation of such alienation serves to heal a wounded soul. The article attempts to draw together the "universals of alienation", as experienced by a wide spectrum of victims of political upheaval. In the words of Farah Naruddin (2000:viii, in the context of modern Somali displacements): "The person whose story has been told does not die". Such stories also need to be told for the sake of posterity, according to Brink (1904:181). Many were unable to write down their experiences, let alone generalise about them. My readers may want to apply these universals to today's millions of inarticulate and disempowered refugees and exiles, to imagine at third hand what their emotions would be. Ovid's articulate voice offers help in this process.

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14 Robinson (1994:25-28). James Baldwin found life in Paris traumatic. Few authors realised as clearly as Iain Crichton-Smith (1984:27) that return would not work either: "No return to Ireland and fairy stories ..." for "the witches have changed" and "only rocks" are still the same.



## 5. Listening to non-literary exiles and prisoners: similarities with Ovid's voice

Hilda Bernstein has published the stories of many well-known exiles who have since returned to high positions within the South African government. For example, Kader Asmal, the present Minister of Education, says of himself that he was a "favoured exile". He admits to the greatest sense of alienation during the last two years of his thirty-year teaching career in Ireland, but that was "because of the increasingly reactionary social climate in Britain and Ireland" (Bernstein Mb., 1:21). He defines exile as "being cut off from the area of your sustenance, your emotional sustenance", but, because he had a family and continued to work for political change while in Ireland, he never did feel "the loneliness, the alienation, that exiles felt". Bernstein has also reported the words of the otherwise faceless and voiceless participants in the South African democratic struggle. Some of these benefited from their displacement, gaining an education that they would not otherwise have achieved.<sup>15</sup> One of the most interesting of these is a certain Duncan Manzini, who told his story in a cadenced, poetic prose, a narrative style that has over the centuries been appropriate to oral transmission (Bernstein, 1994: 109-112). As the son of a simple farm labourer who brought him to understand the need for resistance, he found politics inseparably entwined in his life when he could not find work because of the restrictive political system of the 1960s – "We realised we could not have peace", he says, an unavoidable fact of life. After 1976 he left South Africa, and, travelling through various neighbouring states, ended up with other refugees in Tanzania, where he became a shoemaker for his fellow exiles.

For Manzini, exile brought a certain fulfilment, a trade and companions for whom to labour, but this was not so with many others. Horst Kleinschmidt, arrested with Breytenbach, experienced double isolation, extreme emotional traumatising by a period in solitary confinement, and, in prison, also rejection by the adherents of the Black Conscious-

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15 So noted by Breytenbach about his exiled compatriots in an interview recorded in Goddard and Wessels (1992:62): "Exile is very often a tremendous relief". Pieterse (1971:xi) asserts that South African English writers needed exile "to find their fame". Life outside South Africa after his release from prison was for Hugh Lewin (1991) a "push-me pull-you exile existence". The life stories of most exiles offer insights also into the kind of internal alienation imposed upon black South Africans through the ghettoization of poverty that resulted from the restrictive application of the tenets of apartheid, but that is not the point of this paper. Steve Batji left against the advice of his "elderlies" (*sic*). He reports feeling that he had "gained a lot in exile", particularly in learning life skills, and some formal education (Bernstein Mb., 1:145).

ness movement (Bernstein, 1994:257). The South African John Biznell, who became an organiser for the Canadian Communist party, complains of being unable to "get the pulse of people" because he "had not grown up" there, so that, although he felt ideologically at home, he still was a stranger (Bernstein Mb., I:104). His wife agreed: "You are neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring and I felt an ache for South Africa" (p. 106). Gemma Cronin reported expecting to find London "vaguely familiar", but in the end feeling totally estranged (Bernstein Mb., II:247).

In sum, interviews with SA political exiles (as also the narratives of Boer prisoners of war at the beginning of the twentieth century) indicate a psychological profile of the experiences of alienation during exile that may be compared with Ovid's portrayal of his own exiled *persona*. The fictionalising element that we have postulated in both Ovid and contemporary authors in similar straits is thereby neutralised, leaving in the end a clearer picture of the alienation resulting from exile.

## 6. Displacement voiced: a comparison

### 6.1 Facts

Ovid gives very few facts about his banishment. He hints at the reasons for it, conveying a sense of injured innocence, but not giving concrete details about either his departure from Rome or his arrival at Tomis. In *Tristia* 1.3 we have an emotional evocation of the eve of his departure but nothing about practical arrangements for his comfort. Ovid's journey to Tomis is depicted in subsequent poems in such a way as to confuse the serious seeker after literal facts. Mood, not detail, is what the poetry conveys. Some meagre details may be read from *Tr.* 1.5.83 (perpetual banishment); 1.7.15-40 (he left his masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*, unfinished); the whole of 3.5 spells out his innocence and indignation; 3.7.7 describes a life far from its former state; 3.10.4 depicts his sterile, barbaric surroundings as a metaphor for his sterile life; 3.12.33-34 tells of a constant search for news of home; *Ex P.* 3.5.45 gives a picture of Tomis as a "frozen hell". Initially, his overwhelming emotion was shock (1.3.11). The factual narratives of contemporary exiles are usually more detailed.

### 6.2 Time

The mood of Ovid's exilic poetry grows increasingly dark as time passes, so that the last book, *Ex Ponto* 4, perhaps collected posthumously, is most consistently despairing. Ovid himself frequently refers to the passage of time and its inability to alleviate his pain. He gives the impression of Tomis as a place of frozen time, while it passes at a

normal rate in Italy. "Time passes so slowly you would think it is standing still" he says in *Tr.* 5.10.56, where the third winter of his stay seems longer than the first two. The passage of time features in the following: *Tr.* 4.8 (he is old); *Tr.* 5.8.31,32 (he counts the sunshine and rain); 5.10.1,2 (the third winter seems longer). *Ex Ponto* 4.10.1,2 heralds his sixth summer at Tomis, held fast, like Odysseus, on an enchanted island. Breytenbach (1984b:126) comments on the elasticity of one's conception of time while incarcerated: "Some periods are far longer than others". When his wife was allowed to visit him, "time would stop ... only to flow away with a painful rush" (p. 189). "Time itself became the grey matter of my existence", he says (p. 210). Dennis Brutus (1968:38) writes of life on Robben Island: "one [is] locked in a grey gelid stream / of unmoving time", but (p. 39) "on Saturday afternoons we were embalmed in time / visiting time: / until suddenly like a book snapped shut ...". Edward Said in Robinson (1994:149) speaks of exile as "Life outside the calendar". Ruth First (1965:69) found imprisonment "an abandonment in protracted time". Other South African women report the great loss they experienced by missing out on up to ten years of their children's lives (Bernstein, 1994:18).

In an extended comparison Ovid illustrates how time works to inure animals to any hardship (over time, he says, a bull will learn to draw a plough, a horse to accept the bit, lions and elephants grow tame, grapes ripen and ears of corn swell, acid fruit grows sweet; over time a ploughshare is worn down while it wears away hard rocks; even anger and grief are lessened by time), but his sorrows only grow, and a second year brings more pain than the first (*Tr.* 4.6.1-22). Cronin (1987:31) has an almost similar metaphor: "Times / parcelled / in separate / brown paper packets ... / time that walks in circles ... / or drips from taps ...". Ovid's poem continues (v.v. 29-38) with a second extended comparison that shows how novelty makes any new challenge more bearable, whereas familiarity has brought him only greater misery. Familiarity with pain has added to his burden. His only comfort is that isolation has brought him so low that an early death will end his miseries (v.v. 39-50). Elsewhere he asserts that he had grown in a short period from a fairly sprightly forty-nine-year old, to an "old and grey quinquegenarian", with a similarly ancient wife. (*Ex P.* 1.4.47-52). In similar vein Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981:188) says of himself in prison: "I have 'aged' considerably, for I have lived several years in six months". Isolation causes time both to freeze and to accelerate.

### 6.3 Time as space

Time, for the isolated Ovid, equals space. The distance between Tomis and Rome is so great that a year is needed for a single cycle of correspondence, he says. When consoling a friend on the loss of his wife, he notes that his letter of sympathy may reach the friend only after he has again happily remarried, so slow is mail between the two (*Ex P.* 4.11.15-22). Contemporary exiles and those isolated by imprisonment experience this same conflation of time with space. William H. Gass (see Robinson, 1994:219) explicitly refers to exile as "cutting you off from time as well as place". Czeslaw Milosz (see Robinson, 1994:38) speaks of time as standing in for space, producing a "literature of nostalgia", where lost time stands in for loss of a certain place, the author's homeland. For Breytenbach, "to be living and writing elsewhere" is [to experience] "an absent presence, absent time or questioned time ... writing is like breathing, but more painful ... [you are always] an outsider" (p. 16).<sup>16</sup> For Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981:127) "... time is sluggish, space static and action a repetition of non-action". A young South African activist speaks of escaping to Botswana, at first feeling great relief at his new freedom from persecution, but then, "feeling the distance that is slowly creeping between you and family and [holding] the knowledge that you can't just shout and be in contact with them" (Bernstein Mb., I:113). When he at last met up with his sister, his long absence had made them strangers, they had nothing to talk about (p. 116). Distance and time had broken family bonds.

### 6.4 Loneliness

Ovid complains of desertion by friends (*Tr.* 1.9.5-16) with only one or two remaining loyal (*Ex P.* 2.11.9-12). At Tomis he experiences an all-encompassing loneliness (*Tr.* 5.10). He writes and reads his works aloud to himself, with no-one else to judge them (*Tr.* 4.1.91-92), but often he is "too miserable to write" (*Tr.* 5.7.7, 5.11), "sad" (*Ex P.* 2.7.16), his heart and soul worn out with grief (1.4.19-21), in "scarcely believable misery" (4.13.41-42). He imagines his wife to be equally lonely (*Tr.* 4.3.21-30), but on occasion he petulantly berates her for insufficient sympathy toward him, possibly because she no longer misses him (*Ex P.* 3.1.33-34). The centre of his being is empty, hollow, without constant feedback from his Roman readership. The South African Arthur Nortje comments: "It is not cosmic immensity or catastrophe / that terrifies me / it is solitude

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16 Sienaert (1999:81) writes of his inability "to overcome his anger and despair at the loss of a personal homeland". "Dollar Brand" (Abdullah Ibrahim) in Pieterse (1971:6) expressed it thus: "Where loneliness' still waters meet nostalgia ... I'm hemisphered".

that mutilates" ("Waiting" in Pieterse, 1971:125). Similarly, Czesław Miłosz sees himself as a "writer censored by exile" and hence without readers (Robinson, 1994:36), and Said speaks of the "crippling sorrow of strangeness ... [a] constant estrangement" (p. 137-138). After leaving Chile in 1975 Fernando Alegria reports feeling first "numbness" and then a need to tell his story, to write it for others to read (p. 193). Yet when new friendships are forged, the exile experiences a new type of alienation. His new home brings new unhappiness, termed by Hannah Arendt the "hopeless sadness of assimilation".<sup>17</sup>

More often, though, exiles tell of their feelings of being "strangers and outsiders" (Bernstein, 1994:xvii), and "terribly, terribly lonely" (p. 8), particularly at Christmas (p. 296). In prison for Cronin the "festive" Christmas jelly "was a kind of insult, more than a celebration" (Bernstein Mb., II:257). For exiles, there were "enormous problems", both social and psychological (Bernstein, 1994:17), loneliness experienced by their wives and children, who were cut off from the usual family support system.<sup>18</sup> The child of exiled activists felt its parents "loved the cause, not me" (p. 133). Young children who had fled after the 1976 student uprising had no parent substitutes (p. 103). Some attempted to acculturate elsewhere, but experienced new, intense psychological suffering when they found themselves rejected by the prevalently tolerant racism of Europe or Russia (p. 140). Loneliness is the most salient feature of isolation.

## 6.5 Anxiety

Ovid's fears come and go (*Tr.* 2.153-4): fears of death (*Tr.* 1.2. 51, 52; 1.4.23; 3.3.83; *Ex P.* 2.1.66), but also of the awful, unnamed deed of which he stands accused, its memory a "raw wound" (*Tr.* 3.6.28.29).<sup>19</sup>

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17 Robinson (1994:112-3). This is the Jewish experience. Es'kia Mphahlele (p. 120-28) reports the characteristics of African exiles, where exile becomes "a condition of the mind" (p. 122) and subsequent return is experienced as equally disorienting. The African-American James Baldwin (p. 273-277) reported finding Paris as a "culture shock ... divested from all one had fled from", making even the hated almost beloved.

18 For example, the Kasrils family (Bernstein, 1994:89, 181). Johnny Nchabaleng had no contact with his mother for 27 years (p. 284) and Thuso Mashaba reports being "hounded" by the thought that he left behind his "very sick" mother (p. 67). Jeremy Cronin comments on similar frequent breakdowns in marriages in exile (Bernstein Mb., II:262). Cronin's first wife died while he was in prison and his inability to have closure through "the [usual] social rituals" plunged him into depression (p. 257).

19 Cicero in exile spoke of himself as "the effigy of a breathing corpse", *Q.fr.* 1.3.1. Cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini (1999) and Claassen (1996).

More often it is a vague anxiety of the mind (*anxietas animi*, *Ex P.* 1.4.7, 8, 1.10.25, 26) that he knows is caused by the fact that he has suffered in the past: "like animals that have suffered, I'm afraid" (*Ex P.* 2.7.5-16). Jacobs (1991:121-123) discusses the so-called "DDD syndrome" (debility, dependence, dread) as an acknowledged by-product of the mental torture occasioned by solitary confinement. This is a typical characteristic of the depression caused by isolation, described by Dennis Brutus (1968:23, 24): "How deadly an enemy is fear!". Brutus calls for "pity [for] the frightened ones". South African exiles very often continued to have an obsessive fear of a knock at the door that would herald arrest by S.A. police. Exile exacerbates fear.

## 6.6 External threat

For Ovid, nature becomes imbued with intelligence. He makes liberal use of the so-called "pathetic fallacy", the assumption that non-sentient nature is in agreement with the suffering protagonist. Personalised, malevolent nature reflects his own emotions: on his wife's birthday, the smoke of his sacrificial fire tends toward Italy (*Tr.* 5.5.27); the wild and fierce Getans are like wild animals and represent all that is bad about his isolation from civilised life (5.7.15-20); the area is a frozen waste where only bitter wormwood grows (5.12.21, repeated at *Ex P.* 3.1.7-28); a perpetual frozen waste surrounds him and the sea freezes over, the Getans use poisoned arrows and he lives in constant danger (*Ex P.* 4.7.5-17). As a refugee, Thami Bonga felt safe in England, but comments "Britain is cold in more ways than one" (Bernstein Mb., I:115) – nature and people share the same unfriendly characteristics. For exiles, everything around them is a threat.

## 6.7 Physical illness

Ovid's mental suffering is reflected in physical symptoms. He is emaciated and haunted by insomnia (*Tr.* 3.8.27-28, 33-34). "My spirit lies sick" (*Tr.* 5.2.7) and this leads to an all-encompassing lethargy (*Ex P.* 1.5.21-34) which becomes the norm: "My spirit is used to feeling sad", he says (3.4.45-50). There have been several studies of Ovid's exilic poetry as symptomatic of severe depression. His *Ibis* may represent the manic stage of bipolar disorder (Claassen, 1999a:200-201, 288n.31). The Zulu poet, Mazizi Kunene, on a scholarship to England and working as an ANC organiser, reports severe depression, being able to fall asleep only after drinking (Bernstein, 1994:355). Many South African exiles did not long survive the "alcoholic fog" with which they tried to dull their suffering, or degenerated into mental disorder (Bernstein, 1994:xxi, 23). Alpheus Mazezi, psychiatric social worker in Glasgow, designates alcoholism as the "disease that attacks us in exile" (p. 30). This is epitomised in:

“Brother now I play the bottle” by Kgotsitsile (1990:35) in “Quest (memories of township tennis)” – *sic*.

Ovid’s body exhibits debilitating physical symptoms that reflect his debilitated interior. Physical illness becomes a metaphor for mental and emotional suffering, as when he says “a bottled-up sadness chokes me” (*Tr.* 5.1.63) or that he is suffering an illness of body and mind from misery. The symptoms described in *Ex P.* 1.10 include lassitude, lack of appetite and general peevishness. Other poems describe a psychosomatic malady, listlessness and insomnia. He recognises these as interdependent at *Tr.* 5.13.3 (“for I have developed a sickly contagion of the mind in my body”), resulting in a pain in his side (cf. 5.12.3-6). On occasion he deplores the strength of his body in contrast to his weakness of spirit (5.2.5, 6) but later admits that enforced idleness has weakened his whole body (*Ex P.* 1.5.5). *Ex Ponto* 1.3 contains an extended medical metaphor. A sick man knows his condition better than his doctor. The letter from a friend has worked as medicine for his sick soul, but yet his wound remains “too raw to touch”, and memories of the fatherland he has lost serve to undo the good that his friend’s comforting words had wrought.

Similarly, many South African exiles saw their longing in terms of illness. One reports of herself “I am having home disease” (Bernstein, 1994: 113). His wife says of Todd Matshichika, composer of the music for the musical *King Kong*, “His soul started to die” in London (p. 227). On his deathbed he imagined himself back at home. A medical doctor who left here because “there was more future outside” spoke of “two, three years of mourning, of deep mourning for South Africa ... and being depressed” (Bernstein Mb., I:3). After many years of happy assimilation in Canada he still could assert “[There] was a part of me that was cut off and I mourn that, I really miss that” (p. 5). Similar intertwining of mental and physical suffering with Boer prisoners on Ceylon is documented by Brink (1904:181). He reports (p. 201) the conviction among Boer prisoners that it was their “duty to keep this wound open” – the knowledge that loved ones had died at home. Ruth Weiss says of German exiles that she met in America, “they were so sick, I don’t mean mentally sick, but they were so torn ...” (Bernstein Mb., XVII:49). In isolation, mental and physical ills merge.

## 6.8 Depersonalisation and the loss of a sense of self

Yet greater than physical symptoms lies the central malaise of exilic alienation, loss of a sense of self. Ovid declares himself no longer human, but a “thing”, a work of art “created” by his patron, Sextus Pompeius (*Ex.P.* 4.1.27-36). It breaks Ovid’s heart to think what he is

now, in comparison with what he once was (*Tr.* 3.8.38, 3.11.25). The idea of Ovid as "thing" is repeated in the second-last poem of the collection, *Ex.P.4.15.41*, 42, with the addition of total self-surrender as the poet proposes to go into willing slavery, the possession of his patron. In Roman law a slave was *res*, a thing, not a person (cf. Gaius I, 119-120). The degree of self-surrender here goes beyond any normal patron-client relationship (Green, 1994:377). "Self-alienation" amounts to de-personalisation, described by Sienaert (1991:23) as emanating from a virtual "metaphysical and literary voyeurism of the self", a means whereby the isolated author can almost dispassionately examine and report on his condition. A similar disruption of personality is expressed in the first poem of Dennis Brutus's collection that, being forbidden to write poetry, he dubbed *Letters to Martha*: "My heart, my lost hope love, my dear / Absence and hunger mushroom my hemispheres / No therapy, analyses, deter my person's fission" (Brutus, 1968:1).

Brian Doherty (1995:234) writes of Breyten Breytenbach in similar vein: the poet experiences "alienation from his ego ideal" and becomes the "embodiment of the deconstructed self ... [he] resurrects himself textually as a shifting signifier ... a subject in process ... a chameleon". Objectification as a disintegrative coping mechanism is a central aspect of writerly alienation. The "thing" is a creation of the disoriented self. Although Breytenbach should, in theory, have been reconciled by his adherence to Zen Buddhism to the loss of self, he still needs literature to make sense of this loss. The hero of his *Memory of snow and of dust* (Breytenbach, 1989, the fictionalisation of his prison experience) is called "Mano" clearly a play on "No Man" (Reckwitz, 1999:96). Sienaert (1993:25-45) shows (p. 43) that each of Breytenbach's paintings and poems, also those that portray objects, in some way becomes a self-portrait. The South African artist, Kami Brodie, reports painting a "very depressed self-portrait" as a way of externalising her homesickness during exile, and working through her concerns by means of a series of surreal landscapes and portraits (Bernstein Mb., II:55-56).

Goldhill explains the disorientation of a writer in exile as stemming from "loss of a place from which to speak authoritatively". This loss can include disruption of the basis of formerly-experienced authority, also the authority of accepted beliefs. Such loss of a sense of identity is a concomitant to all exile. Joseph Brodsky speaks of the pain of exile, "but also the pain-dulling infiniteness, forgetfulness, detachment, indifference" (Robinson, 1994:269 and 11). Robyn Slovo (daughter of Joe Slovo and



Ruth First) attests a feeling of “very little identity of my own”.<sup>20</sup> Such is the result of dislocation.

## 6.9 Identification of author and works

Despair alienates Ovid from the one thing that works to sustain him, his poetry (4.13.41-42). Yet author and works become one – perhaps part of the process of objectification. Ovid’s suffering is reflected in the sufferings of his manuscripts as “the children of an exile”. Like the poet, the books are unwelcome in public Rome, and huddle in fear (*Ex P.*13-6). James Joyce, whose books were banned in his native Ireland, considered himself equally an exile, *persona non grata* (Robinson, 1994:53). The South African Christopher Hope says, “Banning a person’s work is highly effective ... a person and his work simply disappear” (Bernstein, 1994: 348). For Jeremy Cronin (1987:76), his writings in prison became himself: “Tonight is an envelope / ... / the letter I, flesh made paper”. So closely are poets and their work associated.

## 6.10 Language as part of the self

Linguistic dislocation and changes in language usage are perhaps the most salient characteristics of the alienated, whether exile or prisoner. Jacobs (1991:124) explains that physical pain destroys language, the “first step” being confession, “speaking in the warder’s words”. Autobiographical narrative restores language. This would partly explain the almost consistent resilience shown by the various writers we are considering, who are used to expressing their thoughts in writing. With Ovid, the poet’s sense of loss of all that is important to him may in some measure be deduced from a subtle change of style. Whereas Latin poetry lends itself to intricate weaving of nouns and adjectives, in a passage that spells out his loneliness, lack of any sounding-board for his verse, and loss of control over language (*Tr.* 3.14.39-41), he uses a prosaic word-order, which appears indicative of extreme emotion (Claassen, 1989). Here (43-52) he asserts that he is often at a loss for words, and that his Latin has a good admixture of Getic. This is not literally true; the poet’s Latin is both as correct and as versatile as ever (Claassen, 1988, 1999a:68-72). Ovid’s claim that he is losing his Latin recurs at *Tr.* 5.7.51-58, where he also claims that his Latin is fraught with

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20 The three Slovo girls experienced intense trauma and disorientation (Bernstein, 1994:442-458). Other children of S.A. exiles, some born abroad, speak of “broken relationships”, of not knowing their grandparents, loss of adolescence, deprivation (p. 450, 466), loss of a sense of identity (p. 476, 490).

barbarisms (61, 62). An impression of speechlessness indicates alienation.

Linguistic dislocation is well-attested by modern exiles quoted in Robinson (1994). Heinrich Heine was fairly comfortable in Paris but refused to be naturalised, for he could not imagine himself as a "German poet and naturalised Frenchman" (p. 132). Breytenbach is content to be "the only Afrikaans-writing Frenchman", but he explains that "being an exile means speaking all languages with an accent, even your mother tongue" (p. 180). Czesław Miłosz speaks of sensing his "native tongue in a new manner" (p. 40), in contrast to what Brodsky notes, "like a dog hurled into outer space ... in the capsule of your own language ... an exiled writer is thrust or retreats into his mother tongue" (p. 10). Marina Tsvetayeva, writing in Russian while in exile, found she had no readership (p. 269).

Their mother tongue represents an urgent need for exiles, according to William H. Gass (Robinson, 1994:224). It, however, continues to evolve at home, whereas the long-exiled author is limited to the version he knew before his departure (Lion Feuchtwanger in Robinson, 1994:256). Breytenbach on occasion asserts: "each day I remember less of [my] language" (in Coetzee, 1978:29, trans. Hirson). For him, to carry one's language with one is "[to have] the bones of one's ancestors in a bag ... white with silence, they do not talk back" (Bernstein, 1994:324). Dennis Brutus (in Pieterse, 1971:18) uses linguistic displacement as a metaphor for his physical and emotional displacement: "... the brackish waters of alienation / lie like dust on heart and throat / ... / unspeaking and meaningless / as a barbarous foreign tongue" ("By the waters of Babylon").<sup>21</sup>

Ovid avers on occasion that he has learned not only to speak, but also to write, in *Getic* (*Ex P.* 4.13.17-22). Even here, he is still celebrating the emperor who exiled him, so this is no really new beginning, and he continues racked with uncertainties. At Tomis *he* is "the barbarian", an object of misunderstanding and derision (*Tr.* 5.10.37). The issue of bilingualism in exile is fraught with ambiguities. The authors in Robertson (1994) recount variant experiences of this phenomenon. Eva Hoffman came to the USA as an adult and learned academic English, but felt strange without true facility in neighbourly conversation (p. 229), as witness the title of her autobiography, *Lost in translation*. Vasily Aksynow refers to a bilingual writer as "an amphibian" (234-235), whereas

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21 For black Africans, transfer to Europe in most cases meant not only a change of language, but even of linguistic system, sometimes giving enrichment, "awareness of two cultures working contrapuntally", so Edward Said (Bernstein 1994:xxi) .

Stanislav Baranczak speaks of the “tongue-tied helplessness” of one who cannot translate jokes (p. 244). It is almost impossible for the transposed writer to convey his experiences autobiographically, and literary fiction is a better medium (p. 247-248). Such a writer feels gagged at home and tongue-tied abroad; if he writes in “international English” he loses nuancing; translating an original work runs the danger of “slipping and falling stylistically” (p. 250). The Czech author, Jan Novak, speaks of “linguistic schizophrenia” (p. 261-265).

Linguistic alienation is epitomised by Iain Crichton-Smith (1984:10): “There is no sorrow ... worse than this sorrow / the dumb grief of the exile ... / until he suddenly feels the ‘foreign clothes’ are his.” Yet, elsewhere Smith complains: “A world with a different language is a world / we find our way about with a stick / half deaf, half blind ....” (p. 46). Breytenbach notes “each day remembers less of its language” (translator Denis Hirson, in Coetzee (1978:29). Loss of ease in communication is central to exile.

### 6.11 Self-hatred

Together with the loss of a sense of self and with speechlessness, come self-hatred and hatred of all the writer had formerly held dear. In his long “speech for the defense” aimed at the emperor Augustus, Ovid claims that he himself was his own greatest enemy (*Tr.* 2.82) and that he is sorry for his devotion to poetry (316), a sentiment that recurs throughout, as in *Tr.* 4.10.63, 64, where he reports having burned some of his works before his departure, so angry had he been at the art that had brought on his downfall, yet (5.7.31-34), “I curse my songs but cannot do without them”. “Solidarity of influence” (above, n. 7) works in two directions: Ovid’s “dying Vergil”, was imitated by D.H. Lawrence in the semi-autobiographical *Kangaroo*, where his *alter-ego* Somers burned all his manuscripts before departing from Cornwall (Roessel, 1990:356). Lawrence saw Ovid as a persecuted fellow-artist (Roessel, 1990:357).

Self-hatred takes many forms. Thomas Mann, exiled from Germany during the Second World War, found that he both loved and hated his country, explaining that it is “[T]errible when one’s own country is the enemy place” (Robinson, 1994:100-104). Hannah Arendt speaks of the self-revulsion of Jews with a “mania for refusing to keep our identity” (p. 118). The isolation experienced by black South Africans in a country like Sweden with its tolerant racism led to considerable loss of self-

esteem in many.<sup>22</sup> When "the body is sent away", the soul retreats into the "cell of the self" (William H. Gass in Robinson, 1994:225). This leads to hatred of the self.

## 6.12 Tears

Naturally an exile's tears flow frequently, and Ovid admits that there is a "certain pleasure in crying" (*Tr.* 4.3.37). In many poems he reports weeping when he remembers what he has lost, e.g. *Tr.* 1.3.1-4 (remembering the night of his departure), 5.4.3 (the poem itself "reports" watching its weeping creator), *Ex P.* 1.2.27-30 (he is a Niobe, endlessly weeping). A similar sentiment is expressed by a South African exile, Thoko Mafaje: "You have to cry it out. You have a right to cry" (Bernstein, 1994:432). Yet, surprisingly few speakers in this 500-page volume of interviews attest to having wept. Perhaps this relates to different social expectations in the Rome of two thousand years ago, set against modern societal norms. Kgotsitsile (1990:35) expresses this reticence: "Baby baby baby / there is no point in crying / just because I'm not at home" ("Red song"), and again: "... I know the anguish of loneliness / is a dangerous luxury" ("Ask for the keys", Kgotsitsile, 1990:37). That many tears are shed in exile, we cannot doubt.

## 6.13 Exile as death

In all cultures exile is frequently equated with death. In exile Ovid feels himself already dead (*Ex P.* 1.9.55, 56). He frequently reports thoughts of suicide, speaking of his "love for death" (*amor necis*, *Tr.* 3.8.39) and of "knocking on death's door, that never would open for him" (3.2.23-24).<sup>23</sup> An exiled South African mother who had no contact with her children explained why suicide is so attractive: "This is how it is when you are dead – because you don't know" (Bernstein, 1994:436).

Breytenbach (1984b:108) describes prison life as "[being] buried ... You are buried to what you know as normal life outside." His prose work, composed while in prison, is titled *Mouir*, a punning combination of the

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22 Bernstein (1994:xx). Even within South Africa those attending a "white" university often experienced self-hatred, so attested by the poet Victor Matlou. When he later fled to Nigeria, it was worse: "Living in exile is abnormal ... but you want to be normal" (p. 77-80).

23 Suicide: *Tr.* 1.5.5-8; 3.8.39; yet *Ex P.* 1.6.41 reports that Hope kept him from suicide; death wishes (*Tr.* 4.6.49-50, 5.10.45-52) are reflected in a wish never to have been born (3.13.23); *Ex P.* 2.11.27, 3.7.19 report premonitions of death, exile equalling death (3.4.73-76). Yet he still hopes for immortality through his poetry, knowing he can confer it on others (*Tr.* 5.14.5) (Claassen, 1996).

French for “mirror” and “to die”. The poet Kgotsitsile (1990:39) addresses his dead sister: “It is not you / but us / shrouded in gloom”. It was said of a South African exile dying abroad, “His wife has been a widow for many years now” (Bernstein, 1994:193). The bodies of such exiles were not allowed to be repatriated, eliciting the bitter comment by one such serial widow, “His body was exiled” (Bernstein, 1994:419). Death can offer escape, but only if the exile can die at home. A Boer prisoner of war on Ceylon reports his constant longing for South Africa: “There he wants to live, there to die, and there to be buried!” (Brink, 1904:55). This longing is echoed by Betty du Toit, a white trade union activist who fled South Africa in the sixties, who longed to return, if only “to die at home” (Bernstein, 1994: 61, n. 1). Death wishes signal the lowest point of exilic despair.

### 6.14 Defiance

With Ovid, death wishes and morbid depression on occasion give way to an almost childish petulance. The Leitmotif of the whole of *Tristia* 3.3 is a defiant “They’ll be sorry!”. Other missives to his wife (3.1.33-36) and friends (5.13) often degenerate into bitter reproach. Occasionally he admits to uncertainty about how he wants his wife to feel – happy, even without him, or sad as he is (4.3.11-34). Defiance masquerades as continued patriotism; even in a political *persona non grata*. Exaggerated “fear” of the displeasure of his imperial opponent over such patriotism amounts to a taunt (*Ex P.* 2.1.11-12). Edward Said, the incumbent of a professorial chair at Columbia university, cannot be regarded as “dispossessed”, but he acknowledges the exile’s “right to refuse to belong” to his new milieu, and his “right to willfulness, exaggeration and overstatement” (Robinson, 1994:145). This theme is dominant in Gray’s poem, quoted above, that has placed Ovid in the Eastern Cape of the twentieth century: “Power is awesome, but what those who have none / admire is the power that is wary of them, even their last independence / ... Because I am relegated I rail against them although they look after me ... / ... O Caesar, see how reduced I am ... / ... I cast them off as you do me and I vilify / these dirty-nailed fellows whom to my advantage I betray. / Great Caesar’s all, from whom we are all banished” (Gray, 1988:80). Such defiance is another facet of the love-hate relationship between persecuted and persecutor.

For Ovid the ties that bound him to the emperor stayed strong, and poem after poem asserts his eternal attachment to the “great god” whom he has angered. Similar ties kept Breytenbach attached to the Afrikaner establishment that spurned, rejected and imprisoned him. Only recently has he finally rejected his “Afrikaans identity” and that because of a

perceived cultural rejection of his most recent works, not because of the imprisonment and hardships that he formerly had to suffer. In prison, he asserts (Breytenbach, 1984b:255), continued realisation of the basic humanity of his captors kept him alive and kept him strong. Such ties transcend isolation.

### 6.15 Hope and despair

In his almost total isolation the Roman Ovid similarly kept on keeping on. Hope it was, he says, that kept him alive (*Ex P.* 1.6.41) but against this there always was the counterpoint of despair: the realisation that the better circumstances which he envisioned were as lost as was he himself (3.7.19-24). Mphahlele's comment was quoted above (footnote 17) that exile was a persistent "condition of the mind". Breytenbach and the imprisoned South African journalists named above all report on the fluctuations of hope and despair they experienced. Benbow (1982:10) says of Boer prisoners of war on Bermuda: "Hope ... keeps body and soul together". He quotes an American newspaperman's comment that for them, suffering of the mind was more intense than physical suffering, (Benbow, 1982:19). This is the central malady of exile.

## 7. Poetic resistance and resilience

The above, then, are the symptoms of Ovid's exilic alienation that we have compared with the emotions of contemporary exiles. That these symptoms of alienation are universal and not unique to the Roman era, nor to this particular Roman author, is what this article has tried to show. We need finally to turn to consideration of what, in any era, makes the protagonist's awareness of alienation at all bearable.

For a poet, the key lies in his literary pursuits, epitomised by Galloway (1993:226) about Breytenbach, as "poetry that served as both a means to keep him alive and to prepare him for death", as well as a medium for resistance. These three factors feature in all analyses of Ovid's relationship with Augustus as reflected in his poetry, as well as in analyses of his exilic poems as self-revelation. Ovid's resilience stems from his mental activity. Some of his poems clearly reflect attempts at entertaining himself, a joking description of coins bearing the images of his imperial oppressors as "present gods" (*Ex P.* 2.8), reducing a Euripidean drama to a fifty-four-line vignette (3.2.43-97) or a fantastic description of the apparition of Amor, who totally vindicates his ancient devotee (3.3). References to mental travel and seeing with the "mind's eye" increase

from first to last in frequency throughout his exilic works.<sup>24</sup> His imagination soars with the creative impulse that fuels this poetry, letter-poems serve to keep him occupied,<sup>25</sup> to bind him to family and friends.

Poetry sometimes fails. Keorapetse Kgotsitsile (1990:11) asks in “Childhood of dreams”: “What happens when feeling / moves down so deep / even the poet lacks the word ...?” Jonty Driver comments: “All this is guess work ... / It will not break one bone of exile” (in Pieterse, 1971:61). Yet poetry works as resistance, as in Benbow’s (1982) story of the Dutch Reformed minister on Bermuda who regularly memorised confiscated letters and recited these, interspersed with Psalms, to Boer prisoners of war instead of delivering sermons. Cronin (1987:73) was able to write lyrical love songs to his wife in isolation: “I found ... in solitude solidarity”. His memory was an inner retreat (p. 87): “part of me still deeply alive ... / ... / ... / I still go there, I mean / A small room / Behind my eyebrows” and (p. 89) “... pools ... where the old pronoun / I, the swimmer behind eyelids / Isiqumadeva dreams ...”. Memory can be a powerful antidote to loneliness. Crichton-Smith (1984:37) writes of a snowy scene: “All is transmuted / into the tracery of memory.”<sup>26</sup> Cuza Male remembers “fleeing from nothingness”, from her homeland, where “[o]nly customs officials believe in the efficacy of poetry”, and yet “I live from my nostalgia” (Robinson, 1994:252-54). Boer prisoners of war on Ceylon kept up their national customs, thereby experiencing the same phenomenon: “The body may have been made prisoner, but the spirit is yet free!” (Brink, 1904:128).

Bernstein (1994:xxviii) notes that South African exiles’ memories were selective: they could remember “only what is tolerable”. Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim) captures the essence of such memory: “The southern spring winds / myself in two / one wintered in cold steel ... the other / a dimming summer / camera’ed in youth” (in Pieterse, 1971:8). Imaginative transcendence is also reflected in Ben J. Langa’s “struggle”-poem “For

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24 Some examples : *Tr.* 4.3.57; 5.2.7, 8, 23-27; *Ex P.* 1.5.34; 1.8.25-38; 1.9.7-12; 2.7.75-80; 2.10.43-50; 3.4.16-20, 65; 3.5.45; 4.4.11-18, 23-45; 4.9.41-44 (where he explicitly states “the mind alone is not an exile”). Cf. Claassen (1999b). The South African I Chanoora says much the same, “Inward is the only asylum / after the womb” (Pieterse, 1971:40)

25 The South African activist, Zatoon Vania, tells of studying at night, every night, while in exile in Canada, “to block out the loneliness” (Bernstein, 1994:409).

26 See Goldhill (2000) on the “slide between exile as a socio-political exclusion and exile as longing for a lost and idealised intellectual topography”, with the implication that memory is transmuted into idealisation.

my brothers (Mandla and Bheki) in exile": "In all our pain and agony we rejoice, / For the tensile steel strength of our souls / Transcends border and boundaries. / However far apart our bodies may be / Our souls are locked together in perpetual embrace" (in Brink & Coetzee, 1986:74).<sup>27</sup>

Ovid would have concurred. His salvation was his imaginative life and the poetry that kept pouring out of him. It kept him occupied, and it alleviated his pain. Although apparently banned from the public libraries in Rome, it was privately circulated and could serve as a subtle tool of polemic against the Emperor.<sup>28</sup>

Crichton-Smith (1984:38) states: "Without light poetry would rise in the dark". The isolated authors that we have considered would find poetry welling up unsought for, expressing in stylised form the same feelings of desperation and alienation that all exiles experience everywhere, but do not always have the words to express. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981:98) says of his prison writings: "I had to find ways and means of keeping my sanity." In an interview reported in Goddard and Wessels (1992:70) Dennis Brutus speaks of writing "at two levels, personal, and the larger or political" and Kgotsitsile (1990:81) reports finding the USA "another South Africa", with insidious race confrontations, but "writing [worked to] retain my sanity", and he calls (p. 88) for the "private voice" to take over, to liberate literature from new political pressures and the call to produce "political tracts". In personal poetry and imaginative memory a poet can transcend the isolation of imprisonment or exile.

## 8. Conclusion

In exile the personal and the political are inextricably intertwined. The Roman Ovid was expressing the same longings that today are felt by all those dispossessed by the machinations of the politically powerful. Ovid's solution to his physical travails was recourse to mental travel. In this, too, he was pre-empting the ultimate resource of an ANC psychiatrist, Dr. Freddy Reddy, who tells of the therapy he applied to those victims of torture who had fled South Africa and were then walking around the refugee camp at Mazimba in Tanzania "like zombies" – to him

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27 In similar vein Kgotsitsile (1990:52) asserts "... boundaries and oceans merely separate people bodily".

28 Geertsema (1993:122) shows how the protagonist in Sipho Sephamba's novel *Third generation* subverts the "captor's medium" by writing resistance in the guise of a "confession". Geertsema dismisses "verbal power" as "not real" (p. 126). I would differ with him. The mock adulation in Ovid's exilic works considerably influenced my view of Augustus.



a sign that in their minds they wanted to go back “to take revenge” (Bernstein Mb., XIII:112). He would put them into a “semi-hypnotic state” and induce them to visualise their torture, but also to visualise finding a weapon with which to fight back, and hence to experience a cleansing catharsis, after which they would be receptive to other kinds of therapy that would lead to healing. Almost two millennia earlier, Ovid, too, had found a weapon with which to hit back. That weapon was his poetry, which recorded the universals of exilic suffering experienced by all outcasts everywhere. That timeless connection seals the significance of his poetry. This article has tried to show that the feelings of alienation that he voiced are the feelings of anyone in isolation anywhere.

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### **Key concepts:**

alienation through isolation  
Ovid's exile  
poetry as therapy in exile or prison

### **Kernbegrippe:**

die vervreemding veroorsaak deur afsondering  
Ovidius se verbanning  
poësie as terapie tydens verbanning of tronkstraf

